March 11, 2005

Best And Worst Of Site Design, 2005

by Harley Manning and Kerry Bodine

BEST PRACTICES

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Forrester Applies Its Review Methodology To 20 Major Web Sites

by Harley Manning and Kerry Bodine
with Bruce Temkin and Michelle Amato

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Forrester used its updated Web Site Review methodology to evaluate the customer experience offered on 20 major sites — five each in the auto, media, retail, and travel industries. Retail outperformed all other categories and travel came in decisively last. Kmart led the pack, edging out nytimes.com and Wal-Mart — but we found basic design flaws on even the best sites we tested. To ensure that they get at least the basics right, firms need to add discipline to their design efforts.

NOTES & RESOURCES

Forrester interviewed 10 vendor and user companies, including: Carlson Companies, Chicago Tribune, Ford, Fry, Intercontinental Hotels, Kmart, The New York Times Company, Starwood Hotels, Wal-Mart, and The Washington Post Company.

Related Research Documents

"Scenario Design: A Disciplined Approach To Customer Experience"
July 19, 2004, Forrester Big Idea

"The Best And Worst Of Site Design, 2003"
September 9, 2003, Report

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HOW GOOD IS WEB CUSTOMER EXPERIENCE IN 2005?

In late 2003, Forrester benchmarked the customer experience on 20 Web sites and found that on average, all but two failed.[1] What's changed since then? To find out, we:

- **Picked five major sites in each of four industries: automotive, media, retail, and travel.** We focused on the sites of America's best-selling sedans, largest general-circulation newspapers, largest discount retailers, and largest upscale hotels.[2]

- **Tried to accomplish relevant user goals.** Following the principles of Forrester's Scenario Design methodology, we attempted to complete user goals that were specific to the business purpose of each type of site (see Figure 1).[3]

- **Looked for well-known user experience flaws.** Our Web site review methodology evaluates 25 design criteria in four categories. For this report, we updated the criteria based on new academic and commercial research plus our own experience from conducting more than 200 reviews since the previous update of the methodology (see Figure 2).[4] Two analysts independently tested each site against these criteria — arriving at a consensus score. A third analyst cast the deciding vote when questions arose.

NINETEEN OUT OF 20 SITES FAIL

For each of our 25 criteria, each site received a grade ranging from -2 (severe failure) to +2 (best practice). Total scores could therefore range from -50 to 50, and passing all tests would result in a grade of 25 or higher. Here's what we found across the 20 sites (see Figure 3):

- **Overall user experience: fair to poor.** Our top scoring site, the recently redesigned Kmart, earned 25 points. But even Kmart "passed" because +2 scores on some criteria offset negative scores in others. The average score across all sites was just 6.4.

- **Retail leads and travel lags behind.** Relatively strong performances by Kmart and Wal-Mart led retail to the highest average score across all industries: 10.6. Travels' two leaders earned less than half the points of retails' best performers, bringing that category in last with an average score of only 2.8.

- **Significant variance within industries.** There was a dramatic difference between the best and worst sites in each vertical. Three out of four industries had spreads of 30 points or higher, and even the comparatively consistent travel sites ended up with a 21-point gap.

Figure 1 Industry-Specific Goals And Sites Evaluated For This Report

User goals evaluated	Companies	Evaluated sites
Auto Find a four-door sedan and develop a good understanding of what the interior and exterior look like. Customize the vehicle with preferred options to determine a total equipped price and then request a quote from the nearest dealer.	Ford General Motors Honda Nissan Toyota	fordvehicles.com chevrolet.com automobiles.honda.com nissanusa.com toyota.com
Media View the latest technology news, reviews, and guidance about wireless products and services. Find out how to get online while traveling around the country for business. Sign up for any relevant news or future reviews of wireless gadgets.	Gannett New York Times Tribune* Washington Post	usatoday.com nytimes.com chicagotribune.com latimes.com washingtonpost.com
Retail Purchase a set of two large bath towels, two hand towels, and two washcloths for a guest bathroom. Select 100% cotton towels in a color that doesn't clash with the bathroom. The towels should be of good quality, with a dense weave and high pile.	Costco Kmart Target T.J. Maxx Wal-Mart	costco.com kmart.com target.com tjmaxx.com walmart.com
Travel Find the best available rate for a room close to Times Square in New York City. Find out if high-speed or wireless Internet access is available and if there's a well-equipped hotel gym. Book a reservation and sign up for the hotel's loyalty program.	Hilton Hyatt Marriott Starwood Wyndham	hilton.com hyatt.com marriott.com westin.com wyndham.com

* The Tribune Company has two of the top five general circulation newspapers in the US: *Chicago Tribune* and *Los Angeles Times*
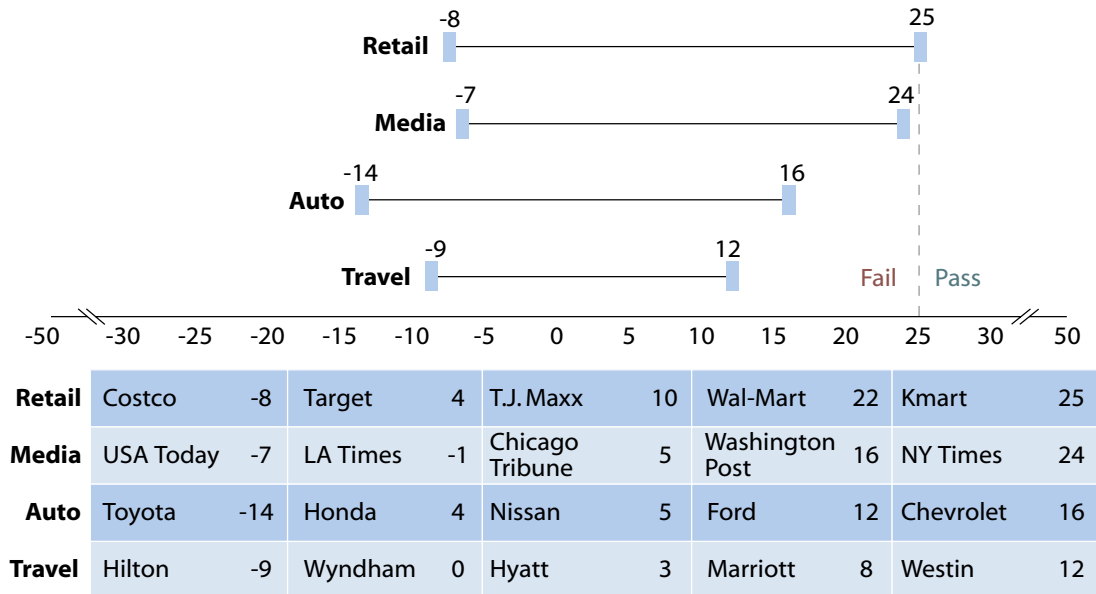
Source: Forrester Research, Inc.

Figure 2 Forrester's Updated Web Site Review Evaluation Criteria

Value

1) Does the home page provide evidence that user goals can be completed?

2) Is essential content available where needed?

3) Is essential function available where needed?

4) Are essential content and function given priority on the page?

We added this question to highlight the home page's role in exposing a site's value and giving users confidence that they've come to the right place.

This question underscores the importance of putting mission-critical content and function above the fold and making it visually prominent.

Navigation

5) Are category and subcategory names clear and mutually exclusive?

6) Do menu categories immediately expose or describe their subcategories?

7) Are items classified logically?

8) Is the task flow efficient?

9) Are hyperlinks clear and informative?

10) Are keyword-based searches comprehensive and precise?

Hyperlinks are the primary way for users to move forward through a site, so making them highly descriptive helps users complete their goals.

This new question combines two previous questions about search — evaluating both the effectiveness of the search engine in retrieving essential information and the flexibility of the search results interface.

Presentation

11) Does the site use language that's easy to understand?

12) Does the site use graphics, icons, and symbols that are easy to understand?

13) Is text legible?

14) Does text formatting and layout support easy scanning?

15) Do page layouts use space effectively?

16) Are form fields and interactive elements placed logically on the page?

17) Are interactive elements easily recognizable?

18) Are interactive elements consistent?

19) Does the site accommodate the user's range of hand-eye coordination?

Text should be formatted in a way that helps users focus on the most important information. We look for typographic elements such as bullets, indentation, and horizontal rules that make text easier to scan.

Sites should avoid small, tightly packed navigation links, which cause users to click on unintended targets, and cascading menus that snap shut during natural diagonal mouse movements.

Trust

20) Does the site present privacy and security policies in context?

21) Do pages provide location cues?

22) Does site functionality provide feedback in response to user actions?

23) Is contextual help available at key points?

24) Does the site help users recover from errors?

25) Does the site perform well?

We've combined our security and privacy policy criteria into one question, since sites can deal with these items together.

This new question combines two previous questions about site performance. We look for minimal disruption of the user experience due to system errors and fast page downloads.

Source: Forrester Research, Inc.

Figure 3 Results From Web Site Reviews Of 20 Major Sites In Four Industries

A spreadsheet with additional data is available online.

	-50	-30	-25	-20	-15	-10	-5	0	5	10	15	20	25	30	50	Fail	Pass

Retail -8 to 25
Media -7 to 24
Auto -14 to 16
Travel -9 to 12

|									
Retail	Costco	-8	Target	4	T.J. Maxx	10	Wal-Mart	22	Kmart	25
Media	USA Today	-7	LA Times	-1	Chicago Tribune	5	Washington Post	16	NY Times	24
Auto	Toyota	-14	Honda	4	Nissan	5	Ford	12	Chevrolet	16
Travel	Hilton	-9	Wyndham	0	Hyatt	3	Marriott	8	Westin	12

Source: Forrester Research, Inc.

Major Design Flaws Exist Across All Evaluation Categories

Our Web Site Review methodology organizes 25 criteria into four categories: value, navigation, presentation, and trust.[5] The 20 sites received the highest scores in value and the lowest scores in trust (see Figure 4). But we found serious design flaws in each of these areas (see Figure 5):

- **Value: content gaps and weak prioritization.** Ironically, our top-performing industries — retail and media — fared worst in our most-passed category: value. Some of those sites leave out essential content while others make content and function hard to find, even when it's right on the page. For example, product photos on Costco are too small for shoppers to see critical detail. latimes.com provides a high-value Wireless Hotspot Locator on its Technology page — but it buries the functionality three scrolls down the page, underneath a column of house ads.

- **Navigation: ineffective search and inefficient task flow.** Search racked up the worst failure rate in the navigation category, especially on media sites — which all scored a -2. Consider chicagotribune.com, where a search for "wireless networking" failed to find both its Wireless & Home Networking section and the excellent CNET articles in that section. Hotel sites like Westin and Hilton have a different navigation problem: They add unneeded steps for users, like making them re-enter the information they supplied when booking a room if they subsequently want to sign up for a frequent-guest program.
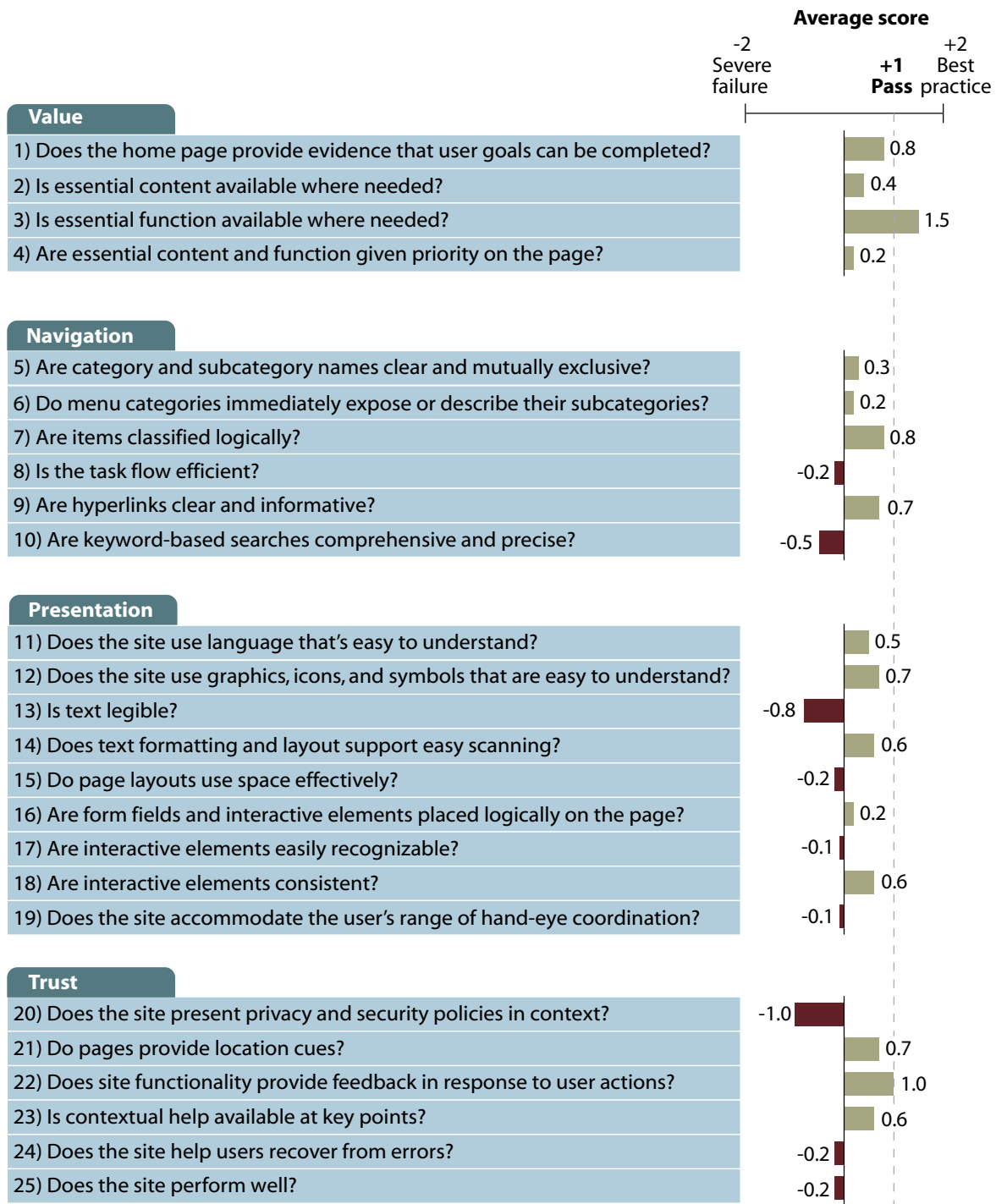
Figure 4 Percentage Of Web Site Review Criteria Passed In Each Category

🌀 A spreadsheet with additional data is available online.

Percentage of criteria passed
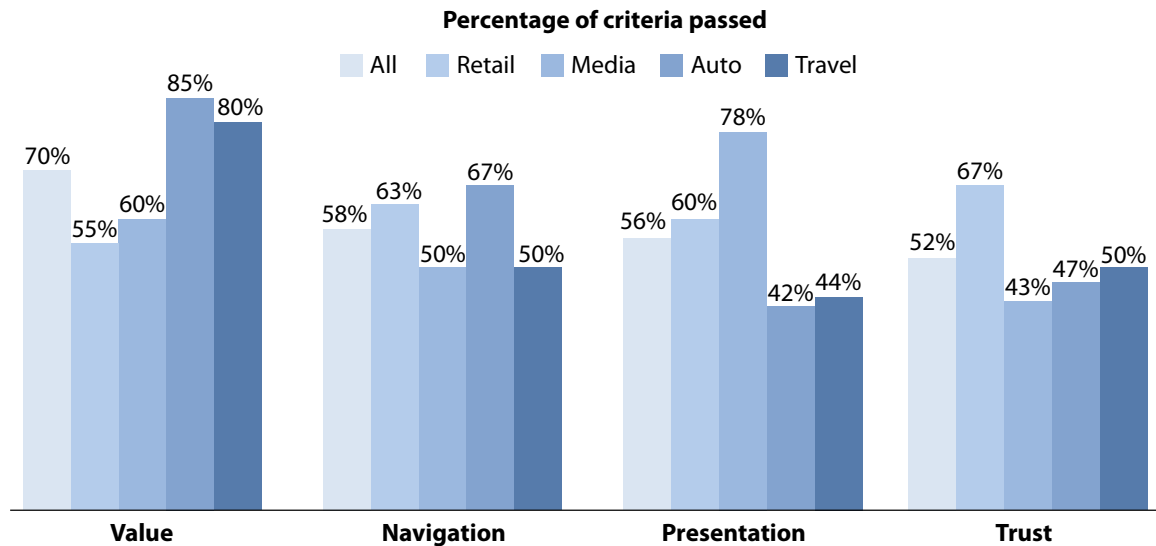
Source: Forrester Research, Inc.

- **Presentation: painful illegibility and wasted space.** Thirteen out of 20 sites failed to provide easily readable content. Only Chevrolet made both content *and* navigation easy to read — a striking exception to the rest of the automotive sites. For example, Honda displays vehicle prices in small, white type that it places on busy photographic backgrounds. Wasted space also plagued the presentation category. One of the most dramatic examples is the home page for Toyota, where a giant animated ad takes up more than half the page, leaving room for little more than high-level menu categories. Compare that with the home pages of Chevrolet, Ford, and Honda, where slightly smaller images leave room for links to tools like configurators, payment calculators, and dealer locators.

- **Trust: lack of contextual privacy and security policies.** The average score for privacy and security handling was lowest out of all 25 criteria: a disappointing -1.0. Most sites failed because they don't place links to policies where customers will easily see them when they're asked to volunteer personal data like credit card numbers. Other sites failed because their privacy policies make no mention of how the personal data is kept secure. A few, such as latimes.com and its registration process, make both errors.

Figure 5 Web Site Scores Across Forrester's 25 Evaluation Criteria

Average score

-2 Severe failure   **+1 Pass**   +2 Best practice

Value
1) Does the home page provide evidence that user goals can be completed? — 0.8
2) Is essential content available where needed? — 0.4
3) Is essential function available where needed? — 1.5
4) Are essential content and function given priority on the page? — 0.2

Navigation
5) Are category and subcategory names clear and mutually exclusive? — 0.3
6) Do menu categories immediately expose or describe their subcategories? — 0.2
7) Are items classified logically? — 0.8
8) Is the task flow efficient? — -0.2
9) Are hyperlinks clear and informative? — 0.7
10) Are keyword-based searches comprehensive and precise? — -0.5

Presentation
11) Does the site use language that's easy to understand? — 0.5
12) Does the site use graphics, icons, and symbols that are easy to understand? — 0.7
13) Is text legible? — -0.8
14) Does text formatting and layout support easy scanning? — 0.6
15) Do page layouts use space effectively? — -0.2
16) Are form fields and interactive elements placed logically on the page? — 0.2
17) Are interactive elements easily recognizable? — -0.1
18) Are interactive elements consistent? — 0.6
19) Does the site accommodate the user's range of hand-eye coordination? — -0.1

Trust
20) Does the site present privacy and security policies in context? — -1.0
21) Do pages provide location cues? — 0.7
22) Does site functionality provide feedback in response to user actions? — 1.0
23) Is contextual help available at key points? — 0.6
24) Does the site help users recover from errors? — -0.2
25) Does the site perform well? — -0.2

Source: Forrester Research, Inc.

SOME BEST PRACTICES SHINE THROUGH THE FLAWS

While the overall quality of the sites was disappointing, the poor scores don't tell the full story. Despite uncovering many fundamental flaws, we also found areas where sites really shine. Here are some of those best practices (see Figure 6):

- **Value: enhanced function.** As a group, these sites perform best at their most important job — providing valuable content and function for target users. Essential function racked up the highest score not just in the value category but across all 25 criteria. We found best practice examples in every industry, with sites providing everything from highly detailed, customizable product views to tightly integrated third-party data that anticipates and answers buyer questions.

- **Navigation: guided browsing and descriptive hyperlinks.** When navigating by menu, users struggle most at the start of the process where they need to pick from broad, general categories. As they progress, vaguely worded links can make them lose their way.[6] To ensure that content shows up in every category it belongs, some sites combine search and menu navigation in a technique that automatically cross-lists items based on underlying taxonomic rules. Other sites clarify menu options by adding specific trigger words to hyperlinks while cutting out unneeded phrases like "click here" and "learn more."

- **Presentation: easy-to-scan text and consistent interfaces.** When users look for specific content on a site, they scan pages for relevant information before reading details. Some sites make this easy by breaking dense blocks of text into bulleted lists and adding bold lead-ins that highlight critical subject matter for deeper exploration. In other cases, sites provide users with the feeling of confidence that comes from menus, links, and buttons that look and work identically throughout their end-to-end scenario.

- **Trust: clear location cues, explicit feedback, and seamless escalation to live help.** Sites build confidence when they provide clear signposts that tell users where they are and confirm the results of their actions. Top sites also strengthen trust by providing contextual help that offers aid like definitions for unknown terms, charts with shipping charges, and examples of services like email newsletters. Ideally, the site also offers easy escalation to other avenues of assistance — such as email or phone access to a customer agent — as a safety net for solving user's problem.

Figure 6 Best Practice Examples For Standout User Experience

Categories and criteria	Standout examples
Value	
3) Is essential function available where needed?	T.J. Maxx's photo zoom function lets shoppers clearly see individual threads on a towel. The site's single screen checkout process cuts cart abandonment by 50%.
	Honda's dealer quote process seamlessly integrates a trade-in estimator that's fueled by Kelly Blue Book data.
	The *New York Times* News Tracker lets users set alerts triggered by specific words. During setup it checks to see how many alerts would have been sent during the previous 90 days based on those words.
	Westin goes beyond typical 360 degree views of rooms and offers similar views for the gym.
Navigation	
7) Are items classified logically?	Kmart pairs traditional navigation with guided browsing. Its product lists engage users with sorting options — such as brand, price point, and color — that reflect real buying decisions.
9) Are hyperlinks clear and informative?	Chevrolet helps users pick relevant links with long, descriptive hyperlinks like "Preview the '06 Impala" and "See how many child seats can fit into your Chevy."
Presentation	
14) Does text formatting and layout support easy scanning?	Nissan makes car model pages easy to scan by formatting text with bullets, varied background color, and liberal white space.
18) Are interactive elements consistent?	NYtimes.com consistently uses dark blue hyperlinks that change to a very legible dark gray when visited.
Trust	
21) Do pages provide location cues?	Chevrolet uses an expanding tree structure that clearly shows the parent/child relationship of every model to its category and the entire site.
22) Does site functionality provide feedback in response to user actions?	Honda provides immediate visual feedback — without reloading the page — when a user configures options like a color or wheel style for his vehicle.
23) Is contextual help available at key points?	With the exception of Costco, all of the retail sites provide a customer service phone number during the checkout process.

Source: Forrester Research, Inc.

PUT PROCESS IN PLACE TO ENSURE THE BASICS

Basic customer experience flaws ranging from overlapping menus to poor error messages are so easy to avoid that it's hard to understand why every site doesn't pass. Site managers can eliminate most of these fundamental problems by putting discipline into their design process. To do this:

- **Turn site review criteria into "must have" requirements.** Companies should give designers the Web site review criteria as specifications at the start of a project. For example, turn Question 6 ("Do menu categories immediately expose or describe their subcategories?") into a requirement for exposed subcategories on your home page — like the approach taken on Kmart.com and automobiles.honda.com. At each step in the design process — comp layout, wireframe, prototype — conduct a review to check the work for compliance against the requirements. Designs that fail to comply should be treated for what they are: errors that qualify for free remediation.

- **Rely on personas for a customer-centric perspective.** Many of the design flaws we found stemmed from companies' internal focus. For example, auto sites use industry jargon like "trim level," "fascia," and "drive-by wire" without explaining these terms. To shift the design teams' perspective from industry insiders to target customer, integrate personas throughout the design process.[7] Teams have an instant sanity check when they get in the habit of asking questions like, "Would Bill understand these menus?" and "Would Evelyn realize that graphic is a button?" When the answer is "no," the site fails at its most fundamental requirement: serving the needs of target customers.

- **Use Web analytics to identify unique opportunities.** Mining Web analytics for design opportunities proved lucrative for both Intercontinental Hotels and nytimes.com. The hotel chain found users bouncing between search results and rate pages. By adding the range of available rates to the search page, Intercontinental reduced user frustration *and* added $45 million to $60 million per year from increased bookings. And when nytimes.com needed to make room for large format ads, the design team examined where users clicked on pages and realized that it could drop the left navigation column at the story level to make room for bigger ads without hurting the user experience.[8]

SUPPLEMENTAL MATERIAL

Methodology

We selected five major sites in each of four industries and evaluated them with Forrester' Web Site Review methodology. We updated the methodology from version 4.0, which we released in September 2003, to version 5.0. The methodology has three parts: user goals that are typical of what target customers might try to accomplish on each site; a set of 25 criteria that explicitly identify known types of user experience problems; and trained analysts who attempt to accomplish the specified goals while looking for the known problems. To improve the accuracy of the reviews, we had two analysts independently test each site and then meet to arrive at consensus grades. A third analyst was brought in to cast the deciding vote in the event of disagreements.

Companies Interviewed For This Document

Carlson Companies	Kmart
Chicago Tribune	Starwood Hotels
Ford	The New York Times Company
Fry	The Washington Post Company
Intercontinental Hotels	Wal-Mart

ENDNOTES

[1] We graded 20 sites using version 4.0 of Forrester's Web site review methodology. See the September 9, 2003, Report "The Best And Worst Of Site Design, 2003."

[2] The seven top-selling sedans in the United States in 2004 were Toyota Camry, Honda Accord, Honda Civic, Chevrolet Impala, Ford Taurus, Toyota Corolla, and Nissan Altima (Source: *Automotive News*). We eliminated the Civic and the Corolla to arrive at five different sites. The six largest-circulation US newspapers in 2004 were *USA Today, The Wall Street Journal, The New York Times, Los Angeles Times, The Washington Post,* and *Chicago Tribune* (Source: Audit Bureau Of Circulation). We eliminated *The Wall Street Journal* due to its specialized focus on financial and business content. The five US retailers in the Discount & Variety Retail category with the largest sales in 2004 were Wal-Mart, Target, Costco, Kmart, and The TJX Companies (flagship brand TJ Maxx) (Source: Hoover's). The Upscale & Luxury hotel companies in the US with the greatest sales in 2004 were Marriott International, Starwood Hotels & Resorts Worldwide (Westin), Hilton Hotels, Global Hyatt, and Wyndham International (Source: Hoover's).

[3] Forrester uses expert reviews to help clients uncover customer experience flaws. These reviews evaluate an interaction by reviewing a specific user goal with a research-based methodology. See the March 26, 2004, Best Practices, "Executive Q&A: Customer Experience Reviews."

[4] Forrester last updated its Web Site Review criteria in September 2003. See the September 9, 2003, Report "The Best And Worst Of Site Design, 2003."

5   Value measures the usefulness of the site for a particular user goal. Navigation evaluates the ease of finding value through menu navigation, hyperlinks, and search. Presentation grades how the ease of consuming value is affected by issues pertaining to language, legibility, graphics, and page layout. Trust measures factors that affect the perceived reliability and dependability of the site by users.

6   Cute link names sacrifice clarity for cleverness but research by User Interface Engineering shows that when it comes to helping users find content, clarity always trumps fun. Source: Spool, Jared M., Christine Perfetti, and David Brittan, "Designing for the Scent of Information." November 2004.

7   Personas present "the user" as a real person with a name, face, motivations, and goals. Forrester believes that personas are a must-have for almost any design team. Effective personas are based on direct study of individual users, presented as a story about a real person, and focused on enabling design decisions. See the December 18, 2003, Report "The Power Of Design Personas."

8   Web analytics showed that, at the story level, users didn't click links in the left navigation column, making it a luxury that designers and readers could do without. The removal went unnoticed by the vast majority of users. See the November 22, 2004, Quick Take "Are Left Navigation Columns Obsolete?"

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